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# THE STRUCTURAL SIMILARITY OF *ILIAD* AND *ODYSSEY* AS REVEALED IN THE TREATMENT OF THE HERO'S FATE

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The essential principle of classic art, whether plastic or literary, is form or law. As applied in poetry it may be called the bridle rein of Reason guiding and controlling the celestial steeds which draw the chariot of the imagination. It is the application of *Λόγος* to the creative faculty of the mind, and consists in the choice and arrangement of material according to a clearly indicated design which results in structural unity, *εὐξύνετον ξυνετοῦσιν*. This principle is most easily recognized in the Dorian ode and in Attic tragedy, but the germs are to be found in Homer, the quickener of every Hellenic poet. The architectonic features of the two Homeric poems, although differing widely from those of Attic drama, for example, are nevertheless quite as characteristic, but the laws of the Homeric epic and the matchless art of the poet are such that the many obscure the one for those whose eyes are fixed so closely on the parts of the structure that they lose the impression of the edifice as a whole. The purpose of this paper is to call attention to a remarkable similarity of structural motif, hitherto unnoticed, between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. But before doing this it is necessary to sketch roughly a few features of the architecture of the two poems which can hardly be accounted for otherwise than by assuming that one great mind—that of the great poet—created them both. I will begin with what is known to all—the unity of time, of theme, and of plot.

An epic poem has been compared to a journey down a picturesque river. The natural way to make this journey is to start at a given point and travel continuously without much reference to the scenery of either the upper stretches of the stream or the part

below the journey's end. This is what is done in the folk-epos and in all Greek epic poems except the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In these alone the actual journey covers only a little more than 1 per cent of the entire length of the river—six or seven weeks out of ten years. It is as if our sail down the Danube, for instance, were to begin a few miles above, and end a few miles below, the Iron Gates. Yet after reading the two poems we feel, to continue the figure, that we have gained a good impression of the whole stream, for in the *Odyssey* one knows the river from the beginning, we may say, tells us of its upper reaches, and in the *Iliad* we find that the most interesting and significant features of the whole river valley are massed together in the few miles which we travel. I mean, of course, that the duel between Paris and Menelaus, the marshaling of the hosts, the description of the Greek heroes from the wall above the Scaean Gates, and a few other features, which really belong at the beginning of the ten years' war, are placed by the poet near its close.

In the selection and treatment of the theme, too, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* resemble each other to a remarkable degree, and differ radically from other Greek epic poetry of which we know. The *Iliad* is the best account which we have of the Trojan War as the *Odyssey* is of the return of the heroes of that war;<sup>1</sup> yet the themes of both poems offer a striking contrast to those of the rest of early Greek epos. For example, the two great poems of the Theban Cycle apparently took for their subject the Seven against Thebes and the Epigonoι, respectively.<sup>2</sup> In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, on the other hand, one hero is selected, and even then the poet is not content, but delimits his theme still further: in the *Iliad* it is the wrath of Achilles; in the *Odyssey*, not ἀνὴρ, but ἀνὴρ πολύτροπος, the *crafty* Hero—a master-stroke which can hardly have been the work of different poets even of the same school. We shall return to this point later. But first let us consider a

<sup>1</sup> The νόστοι of Odysseus, Nestor, Menelaus, and Agamemnon are told at length; the fate of the two Ajaxes and the safe home-coming of Idomeneus, Diomedes, and Neoptolemos are at least referred to in the *Odyssey*.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the first lines of the two poems:

*Thebais*, frg. 1 (Kinkel), "Ἀργὸς αἶεδε, θεά, πολυδίψιον, ἐνθα ἄνακτες—  
*Epigonoι*, frg. 1 (Kinkel), Νῦν αὖθ' ὀπλοτέρων ἀνδρῶν ἀρχώμεθα, Μοῦσαι.

few features in the handling of the plot which illustrate the architectural similarity of the Homeric poems. (1) The *Odyssey* falls naturally into two parts, Return and Vengeance. Now the *Iliad* likewise divides in twain, (a) the Wrath and its results, (b) the Reconciliation and its results. (2) The climaxes of the two poems show many similarities: in both cases the *peripeteia* occurs in the antepenultimate episode (or the twenty-second book) of the poem; the events of the day of the climax are most fully described; the psychological state of the hero is pictured before the day begins; most of the characters, including the gods in the *Iliad*, and Athena, the only divinity concerned, in the *Odyssey*, are massed on the stage for the dénouement, and the heroines, Andromache and Penelope, are removed from the scene until the issue is decided. (3) As Professor Scott has pointed out,<sup>1</sup> in the conclusions of the two poems the stage is crowded, and in both poems there is a balance between opening and closing scenes.

These examples may serve as illustrations of what I mean by structural resemblance. Now let us consider a feature of both poems, never before remarked so far as I am aware, which concerns the theme, the arrangement of material, and the fate of the hero.

Aristotle says that a poem to possess a unity which can easily be appreciated must have a beginning, middle, and end. Now the beginning ought at least to introduce the theme, the end to indicate the ultimate working out of that theme, and the middle to show the relation between the theme and the outcome. Miss Stawell<sup>2</sup> remarks that the end of the Homeric epic is peculiar: in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* the poet leaves in our minds a suggestion of what is to come. More especially, we may say that a poem about a great hero should give us some inkling of his fate, and that a great poem about such a hero should also link his fate with that peculiar trait of his character which forms the theme and is the thread by which the plot hangs together. If the structural middle of the poem reveals this link, so much greater should be our admiration for the architectural skill of the poet. Wecklein<sup>3</sup> in defending the Homericity of the ninth book of the *Iliad*, which is

<sup>1</sup> *Classical Journal*, XII, 400, 403-404.

<sup>2</sup> *Homer and the Iliad*, pp. 187-89.

<sup>3</sup> *Studien zur Ilias*, 17.

regarded by many as being very late, remarks that it performs admirably the function of a μέσον. I should like to add that the ninth book of the *Odyssey* fulfils the same requirements, and that both of these μέσα indicate clearly the relation between the theme of their respective poems and the fate of the hero.

To make my meaning clear it is necessary to repeat what all know of the Greek idea of Fate: the future is known and fore-ordained by Moira, a potency higher than Zeus, yet the fated individual usually, if not always, by some act of *hybris* contributes to this fate. For example (δ 502), Aias might have escaped his fate if he had not "let fall a proud word, and become greatly infatuate." I wish to show that in the ninth book of both *Iliad* and *Odyssey* the hero, because of that trait of character which forms the thread of the narrative, commits an act of *hybris*, and that in both cases this λόγου τ' ἄνοια καὶ φρενῶν ἐρινὺς is directly concerned with his fate, however faintly the latter is emphasized in the poems.

We know that Achilles was fated to die at Troy. This is indicated at the beginning of the *Iliad* (A 352, 416), albeit in vague words. As the narrative progresses we see that this fate will be due to his own choosing. Thetis has told him (I 410-416) that he has a choice between two destinies, death with imperishable fame in the battles about Ilios, and a safe but inglorious return to Phthia. She likewise explains (Σ 96), just before he makes the fatal decision, that his death will come immediately after that of Hector, αὐτίκα γάρ τοι ἔπειτα μεθ' Ἑκτορα πότμος ἐτοῖμος. The situation, the words themselves, and the interpretation which Socrates (Plato, *Apology*, 28 C) gives to them make it clear that it is the death of Hector which will lead to that of Achilles. We have a right to infer, therefore, that the death of the hero of the *Iliad*, which is hinted at in A and I (the ἀρχή and the μέσον, respectively, of the poem), and often referred to in the second part of the poem, is intended by the poet to have been caused by his own choice, and that this choice was due to his rage against Hector, to which he was led indirectly by the Μῆνις.

It can also be shown that in refusing Agamemnon's offer of reconciliation, in Book ix, Achilles was guilty of *hybris*. In the first place, Agamemnon had offered all the atonement that was in

his power: the restoration of the prize, a large indemnity, and an alliance with his family. This alone might easily be regarded as sufficient evidence. But far more convincing is the long plea of Phoenix (I 434-605). This mentor of Achilles, who loves him as his own son, begs the hero to yield, not only because of the gifts offered by Agamemnon, but also to the prayers of the Achaean leaders (vss. 520-523). Prayers, he argues, bend even the will of the gods. They are daughters of Zeus, and if one refuse to hearken to them they pray their sire to send after him "Ατῆ, that he may pay for their slighting with his hurt (vss. 510-512). It is clear, therefore, that when Achilles rejects the offered reconciliation he is guilty of *hybris*, which is due to his angry temper and which leads to his doom (ὑβρις γὰρ ἐξανθοῦσ' ἐκάρπωσε στάχυν ἄτης, Aesch. Pers. 821).

In the *Odyssey* it is much the same. The ἄνδρα πολύτροπον of α 1 is the crafty Odysseus, and the hero's craft is seen in the climax of the poem, the slaughter of the suitors, just as the wrath of Achilles reveals itself in the taking off of Hector. By far the best example of the cunning of Odysseus is found in the ninth book, and it is in this book that the hero commits an act of *hybris* which the poet connects directly with his ultimate fate.

The theme of the Polyphemus episode is the δόλος of Odysseus. This theme the poet very skilfully introduces, in fact he seems to have created the bard, Demodocus, largely to prepare the way for this, the first great episode of the *Apologoi*. For just before Odysseus reveals himself to the Phaeacians he requests Demodocus to sing of the Wooden Horse, ὃν ποτ' ἐς ἀκρόπολιν δόλω ἤγαγε δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς, that is, to describe the greatest stratagem of the hero at Troy, as Odysseus was about to narrate the story of his most famous trick during his voyage home. The bard's song, therefore, forms the overture of the *Apologue*, and introduces the leading motif. This is further shown by the words of Odysseus (ι 19 f.),

εἴμ' Ὀδυσσεὺς Λαερτιάδης, δς πᾶσι δόλοισιν  
ἀνθρώποισι μέλω, καί μεν κλέος οὐρανὸν ἔκει.

Of all the adventures described by Odysseus none so well shows his craft as does the blinding of Cyclops, and it is this adventure,

too, which led to all his troubles, even, according to the poet, the suitors. For it is not until Polyphemus has prayed to Poseidon that Odysseus may return "late, ill, on the ship of another, and find trouble at home," that this series of misfortunes is assured him. That Cyclops knew who had blinded him was due to the leading trait of the hero's character, for the trick would have lost its savor if the victim did not know who did it. The amazing success of the stratagem caused Odysseus to forget himself and 'utter a proud word,' "Not even Poseidon can heal thine eye." Then follows the curse, which is fulfilled to the letter, both in the remainder of the *Nόστος* and in the *Τίσις*. The curse of Cyclops, therefore, in a certain sense is the *μέσση* between the two parts of the plot.<sup>1</sup>

Rössner<sup>2</sup> has remarked that Odysseus recognized his error, and after the slaughter rebukes Euryycleia when she would exult over the fallen suitors (as he had done over Cyclops). But atonement was necessary, as well as repentence. This is not so severe as in the case of Achilles, for the *hybris* had not been so great, but it nevertheless concerns the fate of the hero. Teiresias tells Odysseus (λ 119-137), and his prophesy is repeated by the latter to Penelope (ψ 248-284) in the first words which he utters after the recognition, that he must take an oar and travel inland until he finds a people who know not the sea, and there must set up the oar and offer a sacrifice to Poseidon, and later, at home, to the other gods, thus atoning by sacrifice, for the gods are propitiated in this way even if one were guilty of *hybris* (cf. I 499-501). After that Poseidon shall harm him no more; a gentle death shall be his, and it shall not come to him from the sea.

If the above exposition is accepted, it must be admitted that in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* the fate of the hero is hinted at,

<sup>1</sup>Professor Lane Cooper of Cornell University suggests to me that in ignoring Cyclop's offer of hospitality (ι 517-525), Odysseus was guilty of a mild sort of *hybris*. Every reader feels, I think, that the hero, remembering the cruel way in which Cyclops had fulfilled one promise (ι 356, 379), was justified in refusing to trust him again. Yet it must be admitted that if Odysseus had accepted the offer, and if Polyphemus had kept his word, there would have been no curse, and consequently no further adventures.

<sup>2</sup> *Untersuchung zur Composition der Odyssee*. Progr. Merseburg, 1904, p. 48.

although not described; this fate is directly connected with the hero's peculiar trait of character, which forms the theme of the story; the cause of the fate is revealed to us in the same place in each poem, and the episode in which it is revealed, because it forms to some extent a link between the two parts of the narrative, performs the office of a μέσον. These similarities seem to me to be so remarkable that I must believe them to be due to a single poet.

Analogies prove nothing, but they often help us to see the force of an argument. Let us take one from the sphere of plastic architecture. Let us suppose that the two greatest edifices which have survived from remote antiquity are so like one another in material, in decoration, and even in the cutting of the stones of which their walls are made, that no one hesitates to assign them to the same school. Let us further assume that in their plan and in their most striking structural characteristics they show a remarkable likeness to each other, but differ fundamentally from all other buildings of which we have any knowledge whatsoever. Are we justified in concluding that these similarities can be explained by a theory that the two edifices were planned by different men; that their surpassing unity was due to a development and enlargement by successive architects whose work was separated by generations and even by centuries, and that some of the most startling resemblances were due to late and inferior builders? Is it not at least more probable that one great mind planned them both?